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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the nature of and factors in the involvement of both Spanish-speaking and English-speaking parents in an elementary school specializing in two-way bilingual education. The researcher observed parents and teachers in interaction, reviewed school documents, and interviewed parents, families, and school staff, some in short interviews, informal-conversational interviews, and a selected group received in-depth interviews. It was found that: (1) parents' comfort with the staff and the school was critical in their becoming involved; (2) language played a major role in the nature of involvement, with English the language of structural organizations that involved groups of parents; and (3) parents' view of their role in relationship to the school, their own schooling level, and present economic situation, were major influences on how they were involved at school. Excerpts from parent comments, in English and Spanish, are presented. Conclusions are drawn and include: (1) a context specific framework of viewing home-school continuity can enable educators to more clearly understand opportunities for parent involvement at the school site, and to determine ways to more equitably involve all parents; (2) parents can be enabled to or disabled in demonstrating their school related cultural resources depending on the action of the schools; and (3) a fluid perspective, one that recognizes variation within and between social groups and school contexts, can address the biases and stereotypes that continue to be associated with minority groups of parents and their relationships to schools. Contains 13 references. (MSE)

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Parent Involvement in a Two-Way Bilingual School

Introduction

Parental involvement in their children's schooling has been shown to make a positive difference in achievement, attitude and school attendance regardless of social class, race, or ethnicity (Henderson, 1987). Less, however, is known about the specific school structures, policies and attitudes that are successful in engaging parents who have been traditionally disenfranchised from schools.

Based on previous studies of the parent-school relationship, there is reason to believe that when teachers and schools implement structures, attitudes and policies which are reflective of, and sensitive to, the community they serve, more parents and families become involved in ways which are recognized by schools as being engaged in the schooling process (Comer, 1984; Haynes et al., 1988; Williams & Chavkin, 1989; Zeldin, 1990; Heleen, 1990). When a school's constituency represents various cultural, linguistic, and economic groups the school staff face an increased challenge to implementing sensitive and effective structures, attitudes, and policies.

Research suggests that different social class, linguistic and ethnic groups have differential ways of interacting with schools. These varying patterns can result in teacher behaviors which encourage or impede parents' involvement in schools (Connell et al. 1982; Lareau, 1989; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Davies, 1991). Therefore, it is important to recognize when opportunities for involvement are not available to parents because of economic and linguistic factors so that strategies can be developed to promote inclusion in these activities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the underlying process of parent involvement, from the perspective of the participants, in a school that serves a bilingual, bicultural, and economically diverse parent constituency. Furthermore, it sought to discover how diverse parent groups were involved in a school that is committed to the equitable involvement of all parents.

This study documents specific ways that native Spanish and English-speaking parents from diverse economic situations took part in the varying activities offered by the school and the specific issues that influenced their participation. The study provides an in-depth view into three categories of involvement: activities with a focus on parents' own children, volunteering, and school-wide meetings. Parent involvement is examined from the perspective of how economic, schooling, and linguistic factors, in relationship to the efforts extended by the school staff, influenced parent involvement.

The Setting

Two-way (developmental) bilingual education is a programmatic attempt to foster and enhance a mutual respect and knowledge for both of the languages of instruction and their respective cultures that are used within the classroom. According to Genesee (1987) there are two critical and distinguishing features which highlight the difference between two-way bilingual programs and more traditional bilingual educational programs. These features are: the inclusion of English-speaking students who are learning the minority language, and the development and maintenance of the minority language student's home language while simultaneously promoting

English language development. The attempt to foster equity between languages and cultures is part of the establishment of a multicultural schooling environment.

The two-way bilingual school of this research was a focus, kindergarten through fifth grade school which was created through the joint efforts of parents, teachers, and school district administration. One of the school's founding principles was the specific commitment to involve all parents with all aspects of the school. An equitable and balanced use of both English and Spanish throughout the school's programs was integral to that principle. All classroom teachers, the principal, the secretaries, and six of the eight specialists were bilingual. The school's population of 270 students consisted of 53% native Spanish speakers, the majority of whom were low-income families, and 47% primarily upper-income Euro-American families.

The school presented as a near optimal site for this study because of its stated commitment to involving all parents with the school, and its bilingual/bicultural and economically diverse constituency. Additionally, as a focus school, parents, for the most part, chose to enroll their children in the school.

Methods

On the average of 8 hours per week were spent over the 1992-1993 school year (32 weeks) in participant observation at the school site, which included 60 specific opportunities to observe parents and teachers in interaction (e.g. various meetings, informal conversations, parent-teacher conferences). An additional 130 hours were spent interviewing native Spanish and English-speaking parents and school staff. The multi-modal approach also included interviews with 14 randomly selected native Spanish and 13 native English-speaking parents, in-depth interviews with 4 families, informal-conversational interviews with parents and staff, and collection of site documents. With participants approval, interviews were audio-taped. Ten of the formal parent interviews and interviews with 2 of the 4 families interviewed in-depth were conducted with the assistance of an interpreter. Though the use of an interpreter altered the style of interactions, I believe that the voice of Spanish-speaking parents is reliably and well represented.

A wide-ranging descriptive view of why and how parents, particularly mothers, were involved in their children's schooling at the school site emerged over the course of the year thereby uncovering the process of parent involvement within this two-way bilingual elementary school. Both the personal and school related issues that influenced parent involvement in activities specifically related to parents' children, volunteering, and meeting attendance were revealed. Data analysis began during data collection and extended into the preparation of the final document. Through the sifting, sorting, and categorizing of data themes and patterns emerged. Some of these themes were anticipated because of the structure of the interview questions and the specificity of the research questions while others emerged in an inductive fashion.

The Participants

The Staff - The school's commitment to the equitable involvement of all parents led to the hiring of a staff and support personnel who were bilingual. Parents were greeted on the phone and in person by a bilingual secretary. The staff reflected the ethnic background of the

community they served with approximately 50% of the teachers being born and educated in Spanish-speaking countries.

The Parents - (based upon the randomly selected group of parents interviewed)

Spanish-speaking parents - of the 14 families interviewed, 12 were raised and educated in Mexico. The remaining two mothers were raised and educated in the southwest United States and were children of migrant workers. Economically, 13 of the 14 families were in the low-income working class (as determined by participation in the federally subsidized lunch program, housing, and employment), and one family, headed by a single mother, was in the professional middle-class group. The interview cohort was heterogeneous with respect to their level of schooling. Parents' level of schooling included 14% with no schooling, 43% with a 3rd to 9th grade education, and 43% with high school or higher level of formal schooling.

English-speaking parents - presented a homogeneous picture with respect to their level of schooling and their economic status. All but one of the 13 families was in the upper-middle income group (as determined by housing and employment). The family in the low-income group was headed by a single mother. All parents in this cohort had at least a high school diploma and at least one parent in 7 of the 13 families had an advanced.

Findings

1.The school staff was quite successful in creating a school environment that was comfortable for the great majority of both Spanish and English-speaking parents. **Parents' comfort with the staff and the school was a critical first step that led to their involvement.** When the staff reached out to parents in a concerted manner and used varying strategies (e.g. all written communication in home language, phone calls), parents responded positively. This was particularly evident with activities that were in support of parents' own children such as parent-teacher conferences and performances.

Comments by parents:

Podia hablar más mejor con ellos [school staff] porque no hablo mucho inglés. (PIS2, p.2) I'm able to talk better with them [school staff]because I don't speak much English.)

I'm comfortable at the school because I'm not afraid of being rejected or discriminated against. ...You know it's when I came here [the U.S.] that I learned about discrimination (PIS5, p.15-16).

I came and had lunch with him [her son] one day and he said, 'mom, come in with me to math for a little while.' So I just went and sat down. The teacher thought it was great. I think there's something wrong when a school won't let you do that. (PIE3, p.11)

Raymond [the principal] comes out from his office and greets people if the parent is sitting down in the little lobby. He's done that to me, and I have seen him do it with other parents. So he always goes to make an effort to try and greet them. It may not be a long

conversation but he makes an effort to go out and say hi and thank you. (PIE9, p.10)

I've never seen so many of my people, Mexican-Hispanic people participate like I've seen at this school. ...Last time we had a program, there were people out in the hall, standing there and watching and that makes me happy. (PIS12, p.13)

Es una de las mejores escuelas. Que buena interpretación. (FN,SSP, p.30) (It's the best school I've been a part of. The performances are wonderful.)

Ellas [las maestras] me hablaron acerca de las conferencias con los niños...que dia escojo, que dia está bién conmigo y la hora. Con Sra Ortiz yo fui y Laura vino aquí. (PIS2, p.22,23) (They [the teachers] talked with me about the children's conferences. ...which day to select, the day that was good for me and the time. With Sra. Ortiz I went [to school] and Laura came here.)

2. **Language played a major role in how parents were involved at the school.** When parents related to staff on a one to one or in a group with all same language speakers, such as at the Spanish- speaking parent leadership group, communication occurred in the home language of parents.

Language also affected how parents were involved with the school's parent volunteer program. The volunteer program was organized and coordinated by a monolingual English-speaking mother who had minimal assistance from one of the school's bilingual personnel. As a result, Spanish-speaking parents who were interested in volunteering and who had been recruited, were never contacted to volunteer. Only one dominant Spanish-speaking mother, who was bilingual and a teacher in another school, volunteered on a regular basis. As a result, language was a factor that denied interested Spanish-speaking parents equitable access to the volunteer program. This, in part, explains why the school's regular volunteers were almost exclusively English-speaking parents.

The findings of this research confirm the folk theory that more English than Spanish-speaking parents are involved at the school site as volunteers and in attending school-wide meetings. However, although the site of this research was a bilingual school and the staff was committed to the equitable involvement of all parents and a balanced use of the two languages, **English was the language of structural organizations that involved groups of parents.** When English and Spanish-speaking parents were together such as at Back-to-School Night and at most meetings, English language use dominated.

Comments by parents:

Lleno el formulario para voluntarios para escribir fomularios o cartas o ir a las reuniones. Me gustaría trabajar más...Estoy trabajando y no puedo estar allí frecuentemente. (I fill out the form for volunteer to write forms or letter and go to meetings. I would like to help more. ...I am working and I can't be there often). ...I put my hours available. but no one calls. I didn't tell them again. ...I told Ann [the teacher] about that, 'if you have something to do I'll come. Let me know. ' And I didn't receive word. (PIS11, p.38-39)

...pues que como la mayoría habla inglés pero había o sea varios padres de familia que no entendiéramos. ...tenían alguien que les tradujera, y dijo el director, que para eso lo tenían no quería que nos sintiéramos los padres hispanos mal, porque la reunion era en inglés, y que no la entendiéramos. Pero a eso nos tenían traductor para saber de que se tratara (PIS13, p.27)
(...as the majority speak English but there were several parents who did not understand...they had someone who would translate, and the principal said that they had someone for this. He did not want us Hispanic parents to feel bad because the meeting was in English. And that we wouldn't understand, but for this they had a translator for us so that we would know what was discussed.)

I think it's hard to have a school like that [referring to the bilingual aspect], everything takes more time. I want to go to SBM. I know not many Spanish-speaking people are there. It's important, but I think it is all in English. (PTSM, 4/21/93)

...other parents say to me, "o Riza, I don't want to speak because I don't know to speak English" ...when the meeting has three, four, five who speak Spanish the parents have more comfort then. But when the meetings have one or two that speak Spanish it's hard, eh. ...yo creo que la mejor idea es que podemos trabajar en equipos ¿verdad? Como ahora lo estamos haciendo con las metas del districto. [I believe that the best idea is that we are able to work in groups, and like now what we are doing with the district goals.] Do you remember the districts goals? ok. y yo puedo trabajar con Victoria que habla español o tú puedes trabajar con la señora Trisha que habla inglés pero tú puedes trabajar con otra persona y podemos compartir. (I can work with Victoria who speaks Spanish and you can work with Trisha who speaks English yet you can work with another person and we all can share. (PTSR, p.5)

3. **Parents' view of their role in relationship to school, together with their schooling level and present economic situation were major influences on how they were involved at the school.** English-speaking parents spoke about volunteering and attending meetings as part of their parental responsibility. This responsibility included observing in classrooms to monitor curriculum and teacher practice, and taking part in meetings to gain information about the school and have a voice in decision-making. Economic resources such as flexible work schedules, transportation, and child care arrangements facilitated the involvement of this group of mothers.

Spanish-speaking parents' perception of their role in relationship to the school differed from that of English-speaking parents. This group of Spanish-speaking parents were primarily raised and educated in Mexico. As in previous studies (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Nicolau & Ramos, 1990), data indicated that for the most part, they held the belief that the running of the school and decision making that affected the school was within the domain of educators. When this group of parents volunteered it was in direct response to teachers' requests and as a way to support teachers.

Spanish-speaking mothers who worked out of the home and indicated interest in volunteering were impeded from doing so because of inflexible work schedules. Other mothers who were available during the day and indicated an interest in volunteering were economically constrained because of the cost of transportation and child care.

Comments by parents:

I can afford to take time off work to come in [to school] to volunteer in the girls' classrooms and go to meetings. I'm lucky in that my job allows me to do that. (PIE7, p.30)

... nos mandan notas para participar...como cuando van a un museo para ayudar en la escuela...La escuela sí lo hace [invites parents] pero es que no puedo por el trabajo. (PIS2, p.20) (...they send notes about participating...like when they are going to a museum or to help in the school...The school does it but I cannot because of work.)

I haven't spent as much time in school as I would like to, ...to stay in his classroom, to see how he is doing....I wish I was more involved but the days that I have off are on the weekends. I work, sometimes I work all day...and I work during the night, too. ...when he has programs I have to make sure that I come. Even if I have to go to work late. It's very hard. I wish I had more time. (PIS12, p.10-11)

..volunteering in many ways fulfills a variety of my needs. ...Sending my son into the public school system worried me and by volunteering I can keep an eye on what's going on. I volunteer once a week and do music and movement with the children, help with various projects like baking bread, and doing anything the teacher needs. By volunteering I know what's going on, and so I can suggest things to Sammy [her son] to improve his experience, like sitting up close to the teacher. It also helps me to know what to talk to him about, and it's a way to get to know the other children in the class. (PTES, Jan.6)

Mostly, Mexican parents didn't go to school when I was there. ...just the parents would come [to the school] were the parents of children that didn't study or weren't responsible. ...So, if you don't have problems then parents don't go to school and you can be proud. (PIS5, p.11)

Transportation and babysitting problems are also keeping them [Spanish-speaking parents] away. The school should start a babysitting co-op and maybe parents could ride the school bus and then stay all day. (PTET#1, p.2).

I started going to the functions and started getting involved at meetings and I noticed that it was all Anglos that were doing everything as far as the committees: ...the Hispanic people that were there were the ones that have Masters' degrees and are very highly educated. (PIE2, p.8)

...me invitaron a una reunión y nos preguntaron si queríamos estar en el comité, entonces dijimos que sí. (PIS13, p.24) (...they invited me to a meeting and they asked us [her husband also] if we wanted to be on the committee and so we said yes.)

...porque creo realmente es verdad que los padres necesitan participar en las cosas del colegio. Si no participan perdemos el derecho en un momento determinado de decir

"esto me parece bien esto no me parece bien". (PTR, p.3) (...because I believe that it's really true that the parents have to participate in the things at school. If they don't participate, we lose the right at a particular time to say, "this seems good to me, this doesn't seem good".)

Conclusions

1. **Home-school continuity** - For parents, a sense of continuity and comfort with schools is promoted by a staff's use of the home language and their understanding of that family's culture. Home-school continuity and parent comfort in school have traditionally been viewed in an absolute sense. In other words, these aspects either existed or did not exist. However, the findings of this research strongly suggest that such an absolute perspective does not reveal the specific issues that affect parent comfort in varying school contexts. As a result, it does not reveal an accurate picture of parent involvement and suggests that home-school continuity and parent comfort must be viewed in a more context specific framework. **A context specific framework of viewing home-school continuity can enable educators to more clearly understand the various opportunities for parent involvement at the school site, and to determine ways to more equitably involve all parents across all types of involvement.**

2. **School related cultural capital** - Social class position and class culture influence the differential ways that parents are involved with their children's learning in the home and at school (Lareau, 1987). Resources provided by education, income, and job flexibility play a role in enabling parents to participate at the school site in ways that schools view as supportive of children's learning. The literature on cultural capital within schools suggests that parents' school resources either exist or do not exist, and that the expression of those resources is essentially independent of the school and its practice. However, the **results of this research suggest that parents can be enabled to or disabled in demonstrating their school related cultural resources depending upon the actions of schools.** For example, the way in which language is used at school-wide meetings significantly influences the participation of Spanish-speaking parents and can reveal or mask their school resources. **Parents' expression of their school culture resources, therefore, becomes context dependent.** An examination of the role of cultural capital within schools must include the recognition that institutional structures can impede or enhance the expression of parents' school culture resources. If parents are not involved in particular activities it is the responsibility of schools to explore the reasons for that lack of involvement.

3. **Interactive and fluid perspective** - This research suggests that **a fluid perspective, one that recognizes variation within and between social groups and school contexts, can address the biases and stereotypes that continue to be associated with minority groups of parents and their relationship to schools.** Recognition that parents' experience of home-school continuity and their school cultural capital are context specific can promote teachers' and schools' increased awareness and creativity in planning for the involvement of all parents in their children's learning and schooling. A change in the relationship between minority parents and schools cannot occur without conscious effort, hard work, and dedication. The experience of

home-school continuity is largely dependent on the relationship that is developed between parents and teachers and schools. As the social contexts within schools vary so do the participants in those activities. Accordingly the balance of home-school continuity is likely to shift. Furthermore, the varying types of school activities require a range of resources (school cultural capital) and their expression can be masked or supported dependent upon the structural characteristics of the social context. Nesting the notions of home-school continuity and cultural capital in a fixed framework, their existence or absence, can be viewed as an over generalization that is insensitive to the various contexts for parent involvement within schools and to the diverse resources that parents bring to those contexts.

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Coding Symbols

PI = parent interview
S = Spanish
E = English
FN = field notes
SSP = Spanish-speaking